

MALBON'S JESUS: A REVIEW OF E. S. MALBON'S "MARK'S JESUS"

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Elizabeth Struthers Malbon is Professor of the Department of Religion and Culture in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA. This book represents the culmination of more than three decades of research in Markan studies and is a significant contribution to the field from a leading Mark scholar.

Framed by an introduction and a conclusion ("Implications"), the body of the work is subdivided into five chapters which correspond to Malbon's five-part schematisation of Mark's christology (the author resolves to maintain 'christology' uncapitalized throughout the work given her reticence regarding the possible back projection of patristic christological formulations/creeds onto the Markan text). Malbon's introduction succeeds where other narrative critical treatments fail insofar as it provides a fairly detailed description of the narrative critical method with reference to the literary theory of Seymour Chatman. Newcomers to this approach may find the contours of this theory somewhat complex, though much of the terminology is now standard e.g. 'implied author'/'implied audience'. On the other hand, Malbon draws some subtle, even surprising distinctions e.g. 'Markan narrator'/'the Markan Jesus' (cf. p.54, 66) 'implied author'/'Markan narrator', 'Markan Jesus'/'Mark's Jesus' (cf. p. 231) and in describing Mark's christological method introduces a neologism ('hypertactic' to describe Mark's use of overarching themes as opposed to 'hypotactic') all of which is clearly and carefully explained in her introduction.

Chapter 1 addresses "Enacted Christology", or as the chapter subheading has it "what Jesus does". In an attempt to map the sweep of the action diachronically Malbon supplies multiple diagrammatic outlines of the gospel story. This is not always as helpful as it might at first sound, for instance, outlines 2 and 4 (p.34, 41) are over-convoluted such as to compromise their practical value. Outline 3 imposes on the text some unlikely parenthetical structures which to my mind misrepresent the Markan framing technique e.g. why should Mark 8.27-30 – 9.2-13 be a 're-view' of chapters 1-3 *only*? Again, surely Malbon generalises by suggesting that the "healing" in Mark 9.14-29 and the teaching section in Mark 10.1-31 provide a 're-view' of chapters 4-8 'Because healing and teaching are important aspects of chapters 4-8'? The ensuing synchronic investigation of the interrelation of Mark's Jesus with the other characters

in the gospel is fairly box standard, this is disappointing given the book's subtitle, though in fairness Malbon has written at length on this subject in previous works.

Chapter 2 "Projected christology" discusses the narrator's viewpoint of Jesus. On Mark 1.2-3 Malbon, on the basis of the handling of the OT sources, suggests that the narratee might be encouraged to think of Jesus as 'the Lord' (p. 71). The title 'Holy One of God' in Mark 1.24 recalls the 'Holy One of Israel' used in the OT of Yahweh (p.82). At Mark 5.19-20 the Markan Jesus apparently (?) describes God as 'the Lord', whereas the Markan narrator has the healed demoniac proclaim *Jesus* (in parallel with 'the Lord'). Frustratingly, Malbon bypasses the potential christological significance of these details, which in my view hint that Jesus (somehow) belongs with God in the divine sphere. Malbon's hands are tied since, following Eugene Boring, she flatly rejects the possibility that anyone other than God may be 'divine' in Mark. Warnings about the back-projection onto Mark of fourth century Christology are pertinent, but here there are occasional hints that patristic dogmatics are being exchanged for modern scholarly pre-suppositions! Thus, when making some fairly categorical remarks about Mark's "first-century Gospel" (p. 62) Malbon might be read as advocating a return to Bousset, (see further note 14 on the same page). *Uploading* predetermined conclusions about the non-applicability to Jesus of categories such as 'divinity' risks closing off avenues of Mark's narrative Christology where on the grounds of Malbon's own findings distinctions might be blurry around the edges rather than hard and fast or cut and dried.

Chapter 3, "Deflected christology" deals with Jesus' response to what others say about him. Here Malbon offers an original and insightful exploration of the creative tension between the direct speech of the Markan Jesus and what the Markan narrator says about this Jesus. For Malbon, whereas the Markan narrator focuses attention on Jesus, the Markan Jesus deflects attention to God (p. 144-146). While the narrator and other characters point to Jesus, the Markan Jesus continually points away from himself to God. Thus, Mark 13.32 ("But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father") is "at the core" of deflected christology (p. 150). Malbon affirms that this tension has to do with the transition in the audience's understanding, viz. the initial "Christ, the Son of God" and the Markan ending (p. 191).

Chapter 4, "Refracted christology" works on the premise that the Markan Jesus not only deflects but also refracts or bends the Christologies of other characters in the narrative. The analogy is taken from the prism which refracts white light so as to allow new colours to emerge (p. 195). In a way, Malbon thus offers her own corrective of the "corrective Christology" championed by Theodore Weeden. After a brief summary and dismissal of the work of J.D. Kingsbury and J.C. Naluparayil on the 'Son of Man', Malbon propounds her own thoughts on the 'Son of Humanity'. Is Malbon's 'more literal' translation 'Son of Humanity' instead of 'Son of Man' for *ho huios tou anthrōpou* (e.g. p. 57) an outcome of a feminist agenda? It is cumbersome and potentially misleading since it might appear to favour an Ezekielian, rather than a Danielic background to the epithet, (cf. p. 203). But perhaps this is what Malbon wants? At any rate, her treatment focuses more on the *human* and *representative* connotations that attach to the title (p. 201-202). The observation that at Mark 14.62 the title *refracts* what is being said about "Christ" and "Son of God" (p. 208) is useful, but Malbon arguably plays down the high christological implications of the implicitly reflexive claim Mark's Jesus makes about the exalted (Danielic) "Son of Man" figure.

Chapter 5 supplies a cursory discussion of “Reflected Christology”, being the speech and acts of characters in the Markan narrative which reflects what the Markan Jesus says and does. Here Malbon draws on some of her past work on the “minor characters”, who though minor, have an important role in Mark as exemplars of suffering and service which links in to Jesus’ messiahship. Again, the brevity with which this subject is addressed suggests that Malbon is reluctant to simply repeat conclusions reached in previous work.

Finally, the “Implications” section presents the conclusions of Malbon’s study and some observations concerning “Mark’s Jesus” in relation to the “Historical Jesus” movement via two of its key exponents, namely, J.D. Crossan and N.T. Wright. This, however, seems awkward and misplaced, as if it were an afterthought needing somehow to be squeezed into the book. However, the treatment is far too cursory to be satisfactory and belongs elsewhere. On the plus side, contrary to frequent assumptions of narrative critics, Malbon has successfully demonstrated that the point of view of the Markan Jesus is not always aligned with that of the Markan narrator and that there is a distinction between the Markan narrator and the Markan implied author. Malbon’s surmise (p. 237) that the implied author has the narrator focus on Jesus as “near to God” and has Jesus focus on “God as sovereign” is representative of the work as a whole and is its strongest conclusion.

On balance, Malbon’s five-pronged approach to Mark’s narrative Christology provides a useful framework for the study of the Gospel. The distinctions made between characters, implied author, Markan narrator etc. further our understanding of the internal dynamics of Mark. Nevertheless, the treatment is not wholly satisfactory, as the comments above attest.